M139
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1917

A VERY cold winter's night, so silent that the air seemed frozen, and since there was no moon congealed to the stillness of glass spread over England. Ponds and ditches were frozen; the puddles made glazed eyes in the roads, and on the pavement the frost had raised slippery knobs. Darkness pressed on the windows; towns had merged themselves in open country. No light shone, save when a searchlight rayed round the sky, and stopped, here and there, as if to ponder some suspected spot.

"If that is the river," said Eleanor, pausing outside the station, "Westminster must be there." She turned.

She was dining with Renny and Maggie, who lived in one of the obscure little streets under the shadow of the Abbey. She walked on. The further side of the street was almost invisible. The lamps were shrouded in blue. She flashed her torch on to a name on a wall. Again she flashed her torch. Here it lit up a brick wall; there a dark green tuft of ivy. At last the number thirty, the number she was looking for, shone out. She knocked and rang at the same moment, for the darkness seemed to muffle sound as well as sight. Silence weighed on her as she stood there waiting. Then the door opened and a man's voice said, "Come in!"

He shut the door behind him, quickly, as if to shut

out the light. It looked strange after the streets: the perambulator in the hall; the umbrellas in the stand; the carpet, the pictures: they all seemed intensified.

"Come in!" said Renny again, and led her into the sitting-room ablaze with light. Another man was standing in the room, and she was surprised because she had expected to find them alone. But the man was somebody she did not know.

For a moment they stared at each other; then Renny said, "You know Nicholas . . ." but he did not speak the surname distinctly, and it was so long that she could not catch it. A foreign name, she thought. He was clearly not English. He shook hands with a bow like a foreigner, and he went on talking, as if he were in the middle of a sentence that he wished to finish . . . "we are talking about Napoleon . . ." he said, turning to her.

"I see," she said. But she had no notion what he was saying. They were in the middle of an argument, she supposed. But it came to an end without her understanding a word of it, except that it had to do with Napoleon. She took off her coat. They stopped talking.

"I will go and tell Maggie," said Renny. He left them abruptly.

"You were talking about Napoleon?" Eleanor said. She looked at the man whose surname she had not heard. He was very dark; he had a rounded head and dark eyes.

I've interrupted them, she felt, and I've nothing whatever to say. She felt dazed and cold. She spread her hands over the fire. It was a real fire; wood blocks were blazing; the flame ran along the streaks of shiny tar.

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"Napoleon," she said, warming her hands. She spoke without any meaning.

"We were considering the psychology of great men," he said, "by the light of modern science," he added with a little laugh. She wished the argument had been more within her reach.

"That's very interesting," she said shyly.

"Yes—if we knew anything about it," he said.

"If we knew anything about it . . ."she repeated. There was a pause. She felt numb all over—not only her hands, but her brain.

"The psychology of great men——" she said, for she did not wish him to think her a fool, ". . . was that what you were discussing?"

"We were saying——" He paused. She guessed that he found it difficult to sum up their argument—they had evidently been talking for some time, judging by the newspapers lying about and the cigarette-ends on the table.

"I was saying," he went on, "I was saying we do not know ourselves, ordinary people; and if we do not know ourselves, how then can we make religions, laws, that—" he used his hands as people do who find language obdurate, "that——"

"That fit—that fit," she said, supplying him with a word that was shorter, she felt sure, than the dictionary word that foreigners always used.

"—that fit, that fit," he said, taking the word and repeating it as if he were grateful for her help.

". . . that fit," she repeated. She had no idea what they were talking about. Then suddenly, as she bent to warm her hands over the fire words floated together in her mind and made one intelligible sentence. It

seemed to her that what he had said was, "We cannot make laws and religions that fit because we do not know ourselves."

"How odd that you should say that!" she said, smiling at him, "because I've so often thought it myself!"

"Why is that odd?" he said. "We all think the same things; only we do not say them."

"Coming along in the train tonight," she began, "I was thinking about this war—I don't feel this, but other people do . . ." She stopped. He looked puzzled; probably she had misunderstood what he had said; she had not made her meaning plain.

"I mean," she began again, "I was thinking as I came along in the train——"

But here Renny came in.

He was carrying a tray with bottles and glasses.

"It is a great thing," said Nicholas, "being the son of a wine merchant."

It sounded like a quotation from the French grammar.

The son of the wine merchant, Eleanor repeated to herself, looking at his red cheeks, dark eyes and large nose. The other man must be Russian, she thought. Russian, Polish, Jewish?—she had no idea.

She drank; the wine seemed to caress a knob in her spine. Here Maggie came in.

"Good evening," she said, disregarding the foreigner's bow as if she knew him too well.

"Papers, papers, papers," she protested, looking at the litter on the floor.

"We dine in the basement," she continued, turning to Eleanor, "because we've no servants." She led the way down the steep little stairs.

"But Magdalena," said Nicholas, as they stood in the little low-ceilinged room in which dinner was laid, "Sara said, 'We shall meet tomorrow night at Maggie's . . .' She is not here."

He stood while the others sat down.

"She will come in time," said Maggie.

"I shall ring her up," said Nicholas. He left the room.

"Isn't it much nicer," said Eleanor, taking her plate, "not having servants . . ."

"We have a woman to do the washing-up," said Maggie.

"And we are extremely dirty," said Renny.

He took up a fork and examined it between the prongs.

"No, this fork, as it happens, is clean," he said, and put it down again.

Nicholas came back into the room. He looked perturbed. "She is not there," he said to Maggie. "I rang her up, but I could get no answer."

"Probably she's coming," said Maggie. "Or she may have forgotten. . . ."

She handed him his soup. But he sat looking at his plate without moving. Wrinkles had come on his forehead; he made no attempt to hide his anxiety. "There!" he suddenly exclaimed, interrupting them as they talked. "She is coming!" he added. He put down his spoon and waited. Someone was coming slowly down the steep stairs.

The door opened and Sara came in. She looked pinched with the cold. Her cheeks were white here and red there, and she blinked as if she were still dazed from her walk through the blue-shrouded streets.

She gave her hand to Nicholas and he kissed it. But she wore no engagement ring, Eleanor observed.

"Yes, we are dirty," said Maggie, looking at her. She was in her day clothes. "In rags," she added, for a loop of gold thread hung down from her sleeve.

"I was thinking how beautiful . . ." said Eleanor, for her eyes had been resting on the silver dress with gold threads in it. "Where did you get it?"

"In Constantinople, from a Turk," said Maggie.

"A turbaned and fantastic Turk," Sara murmured, stroking the sleeve as she took her plate. She still seemed dazed.

"And the plates," said Eleanor, looking at the purple birds on her plate, "Don't I remember them?" she asked.

"In the cabinet in the drawing-room at home," said Maggie. "But it seemed silly—keeping them in a cabinet."

"We break one every week," said Renny.

"They'll last the war," said Maggie.

Eleanor observed a curious mask-like expression come down over Renny's face as she said "the war." Like all the French, she thought, he cares passionately for his country. But contradictorily, she felt, looking at him. He was silent. His silence oppressed her. He was a formidable man.

"And why were you so late?" said Nicholas, turning to Sara. He spoke gently, reproachfully, rather as if she were a child. He poured her out a glass of wine.

Take care, Eleanor felt inclined to say to her; the wine goes to one's head. She had not drunk wine for months. She was feeling already a little blurred; a little light-headed.

But Sara drank it. Then she burst out:

"Because of that damned fool."

"Damned fool?" said Maggie. "Which?"

"Eleanor's nephew," said Sara. "North. Eleanor's nephew, North." She held her glass towards Eleanor, as if she were addressing her. "North . . ." Then she smiled. "There I was, sitting alone. The bell rang. 'That's the wash,' I said. Footsteps came up the stairs. There was North—North," she raised her hand to her head as if in salute, "cutting a figure like this. . . . 'What the devil's that for?' I asked. 'I leave for the Front tonight,' he said, clicking his heels together. 'I'm a lieutenant in ——' whatever it was—Royal Regiment of Rat-catchers or something. . . . And he hung his cap on the bust of our grandfather. And I poured out tea. 'How many lumps of sugar does a lieutenant in the Royal Rat-catchers require?' I asked. 'One. Two. Three. Four.' "

She dropped pellets of bread on to the table. As each fell, it seemed to emphasise her bitterness. She looked older, more worn; though she laughed, she was bitter.

"Who is North?" Nicholas asked. He pronounced the word "North" as if it were a point on the compass.

"My nephew. My brother Morris's son," Eleanor explained.

"There he sat," Sara resumed, "in his mud-coloured uniform, with his switch between his legs, and his ears sticking out on either side of his pink, foolish face, and whatever I said, 'Good,' he said, 'Good,' 'Good,' until I took up the poker and tongs," she took up her knife and fork, "and played 'God save the King, Happy and Glorious, Long to reign over us——' " She held her knife and fork as if they were weapons.

I'm sorry he's gone, Eleanor thought, that nice cricketing boy—a picture came before her eyes—smoking a cigar on the terrace. I'm sorry. . . . Then another picture formed. She was sitting on the terrace; the sun was setting; a maid came out and said, "The soldiers are guarding the line with fixed bayonets!" That was how she had heard of the war—three years ago. And she had thought, putting down her coffee-cup on a little table, Not if I can help it! overcome by an absurd but vehement desire to protect those hills; those hills across the meadow. . . . She looked up.

"How unfair you are," Nicholas was saying to Sara. "Prejudiced; narrow; unfair," he repeated, tapping her hand with his finger.

He was saying what Eleanor felt herself.

"Yes. Isn't it natural . . ." she began. "Could you allow the Germans to invade England and do nothing?" she said, turning to Renny. She was sorry she had spoken; and the words were not the ones she had meant to use. There was an expression of suffering, or was it anger? on his face.

"I?" he said. "I help them to make shells."

Maggie stood behind him. She had brought in the meat. "Carve," she said. He was staring at the meat which she had put down in front of him. He took up the knife and began to carve mechanically.

"Now, Nurse," she reminded him. He cut another helping.

"Yes," said Eleanor awkwardly as Maggie took away the plate. She did not know what to say. She spoke without thinking. "Let's end it as quickly as possible and then . . ." She looked at him. He was silent. He turned away. He had turned to listen to

what the others were saying, as if to take refuge from speaking himself.

"Poppycock, poppycock . . . don't talk such damned poppycock—that's what you really said," Nicholas was saying. His hands were large and clean and the finger-nails were trimmed very close, Eleanor noticed.

Sara nodded. She seemed to accept his correction. "But then he gave his bridle reins a shake," she added, "and said, 'Adieu for evermore, aideu for evermore!' " She stretched out her hand and poured herself another glass of wine.

"You shall have no more to drink," said Nicholas.

He moved away the bottle. "You should have had more self-control," he said. "She saw herself," he said, turning to Eleanor, "on top of a tower, waving a white handkerchief to a knight in armour."

"And the moon was rising over a dark moor," Sara murmured, touching a pepper-pot.

The pepper-pot's a dark moor, Eleanor thought, looking at it. A little blur had come round the edges of things. It was the wine; it was the war. Things seemed to have lost their skins; to be freed from some surface hardness; even the chair with gilt claws, at which she was looking, seemed to radiate out some warmth, some glamour.

"I remember that chair," she said to Maggie. "And your mother . . ." she added. But she always saw Eugénie not sitting but in movement.

". . . dancing," she added.

"Dancing . . ." Sara repeated. She began drumming on the table with her fork.

"When I was young, I used to dance," she hummed.

"All men loved me when I was young. . . . Roses and syringas hung, when I was young. D'you remember, Maggie?" She smiled, looking at her sister as if they both remembered the same thing.

Maggie nodded. "Dancing, in the bedroom. A waltz," she said.

"A waltz . . ." said Eleanor. Sara was drumming a waltz rhythm on the table. Eleanor began to hum in time to it: "Hoity te, toity te, hoity te. . . ."

A long-drawn hollow sound wailed out.

"No, no!" she protested, as if somebody had given her the wrong note. But the sound wailed again.

"A fog horn?" she said. "On the river?"

But as she said it she knew what it was.

The siren wailed again.

"The Germans!" said Renny. "Those damned Germans!" He put down his knife and fork with an exaggerated gesture of boredom.

"Another raid," said Maggie. She got up and left the room. Renny followed her.

"The Germans . . ." said Eleanor as the door shut. She felt as if some dull bore had interrupted an interesting conversation. The colours began to fade. She had been looking at the red chair. It seemed to lose its radiance.

They heard the rush of wheels in the street. Everything seemed to be going past very quickly. They heard feet tapping along the pavement. Eleanor got up and drew the curtains slightly apart. The basement was sunk beneath the pavement, so that she only saw people's legs and skirts as they went past the area

railings. Two men came past walking very quickly; then an old woman walked by with her skirt swinging from side to side.

"Oughtn't we to ask people in?" she said, turning round. But when she looked back the old woman had disappeared. So had the men. The street was now quite empty. The houses opposite were completely curtained. She drew their own curtain carefully. The table, with the gay china and the lamp, seemed brighter than ever.

She sat down again. "D'you mind air raids?" Nicholas asked, looking at her with his inquisitive expression. "People differ so much."

"Not at all," she said. She would have crumbled a piece of bread to show him that she was at her ease; but as she was not afraid, the action seemed to her unnecessary.

"The chances of being hit oneself are so small," she said. "What were we saying?" she added.

It seemed to her that they had been saying something extremely interesting; but she could not remember what. They sat silent for a moment. Then they heard a shuffling on the stairs.

"The children . . ." said Sara. They heard the dull boom of a gun in the distance.

Here Renny came in.

"Bring your plates," he said.

"In here." He led them into the cellar. It was a large cellar. With its crypt-like ceiling and stone walls it had a damp ecclesiastical look. It was used partly for coal, partly for wine. The light in the centre shone on glittering heaps of coal; bottles of wine wrapped in straw lay on their sides on stone shelves. It had a

mouldy smell of wine, straw and damp. It was chilly after the dining-room. Sara came in carrying quilts and dressing-gowns which she had fetched from upstairs. Eleanor was glad to wrap herself in a blue dressing-gown; she wrapped it round her and sat holding her plate on her knees.

"And now?" said Sara, holding her spoon erect.

They all looked as if they were waiting for something to happen. Maggie came in carrying a plum pudding.

"We may as well finish our dinner," she said. But she spoke too sensibly; she was anxious about the children, Eleanor guessed. They were in the kitchen. She had seen them as she passed.

"Are they asleep?" she asked.

"Yes. But if the guns . . ." she began, helping the pudding. Another gun boomed out. This time it was distinctly louder.

"They've got through the defences," said Nicholas.

They began to eat their pudding.

A gun boomed again. This time there was a bark in its boom.

"Hampstead," said Nicholas. He took out his watch. The silence was profound. Nothing happened. Eleanor looked at the blocks of stone arched over their heads. She noticed a spider's web in one corner. another gun boomed. A sigh of air rushed up with it. It was right on top of them this time.

"The Embankment," said Nicholas. Maggie put down her plate and went into the kitchen.

There was profound silence. Nothing happened. Nicholas looked at his watch as if he were timing the guns. There was something queer about him, Eleanor

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thought; medical, priestly? He wore a seal that hung down from his watch-chain. The number on the box opposite was 1397. The Germans must be overhead now. She felt a curious heaviness on top of her head. One, two, three, four, she counted, looking up at the greenish-grey stone. Then there was a violent crack of sound, like the split of lightning in the sky. The spider's web oscillated.

"On top of us," said Nicholas, looking up. They all looked up. At any moment a bomb might fall. There was dead silence. They heard Maggie's voice in the kitchen.

"That was nothing. Turn round and go to sleep." She spoke very calmly and soothingly.

One, two, three four, Eleanor counted. The spider's web was swaying. That stone may fall, she thought, fixing a certain stone with her eyes. Then a gun boomed again. It was fainter—further away.

"That's over," said Nicholas. He shut his watch with a click. And they all turned and shifted on their hard chairs as if they had been cramped.

Maggie came in.

"Well, that's over," she said. "He woke for a moment, but he went off to sleep again," she said in an undertone to Renny, "but the baby slept right through." She sat down and took the plate that Renny was holding for her.

"Now let's finish our pudding," she said, speaking in her natural voice.

"Now we will have some wine," said Renny. He examined one bottle; then another; finally he took a

third and wiped it carefully with the tail of his dressing-gown. He placed the bottle on a wooden case and they sat round in a circle.

"It didn't come to much, did it?" said Sara. She was tilting back her chair as she held out her glass.

"Ah, but we were frightened," said Nicholas. "Look—how pale we all look."

They looked at each other. Draped in their quilts and dressing-gowns, against the grey-green walls, they all looked whitish, greenish.

"It's partly the light," said Maggie. "Eleanor," she said, looking at her, "looks like an abbess."

The deep-blue dressing-gown which hid the foolish little ornaments, the tabs of velvet and lace on her dress, had improved her appearance. Her middle-aged face was crinkled like an old glove that has been creased into a multitude of fine lines.

"Untidy, am I?" she said, putting her hand to her hair.

"No. Don't touch it," said Maggie.

"And what were we talking about before the raid?" Eleanor asked. Again she felt that they had been in the middle of saying something very interesting when they were interrupted. But there had been a complete break; none of them could remember what they had been saying.

"Well, it's over now," said Sara. "So let's drink a health—Here's to the New World!" she exclaimed, raising her glass with a flourish. They all felt a sudden desire to talk and laugh.

"Here's to the new world!" they all cried, raising their glasses, and clinking them together.

The five glasses filled with yellow liquid came together in a bunch.

"To the new world!" they cried and drank.

"And now," said Renny, putting down his glass, "let us go upstairs."

It was chilly; a little draught came in under the door and played round their ankles.

"And leave this cellar," said Sara, stretching her arms out, "this cave of mud and dung. . . ."

"Listen!" Maggie interrupted. She held up her hand. "I thought I heard the guns again. . . ."

They listened. The guns were still firing, but far away in the distance.

"They're only killing other people," said Renny savagely. He kicked the wooden box.

But you must let us think of something else, Eleanor protested. The mask had come down over his face.

"And what nonsense, what nonsense Renny talks," said Nicholas, helping her out of her dressing-gown. "Only children letting off fireworks in the back garden," he muttered. They went upstairs.

Eleanor came into the drawing-room. It looked larger than she remembered it, and very spacious and comfortable. Papers were strewn on the floor; the fire was burning brightly; it was warm and cheerful. She sank down into an armchair. Sara and Nicholas had lagged behind. The others were helping the nurse to carry the children up to bed, she supposed. She lay back in the chair. Everything seemed to become quiet and natural again. A feeling of great calm possessed her. It was as if another space of time had been issued to her, but, robbed by the presence of death, of something personal, she felt—she hesitated for a word; "immune?" Was

that what she meant? Immune, she said, looking at a picture without seeing it. Immune, she repeated. It was a picture of a hill and a village perhaps in the South of France; perhaps in Italy. There were olive trees; and white roofs grouped against a hillside. Immune, she repeated, looking at the picture.

She could hear a gentle thudding on the floor above; Maggie and Renny were settling the children into their beds again, she supposed. There was a little squeak, like a sleepy bird chirping in its nest. It was very private and peaceful after the guns. But here the others came in.

"Did they mind it?" she said, sitting up, "—the children?"

"No," said Maggie. "They slept through it."

"But they may have dreamt," said Sara, pulling up a chair. Nobody spoke. It was very silent. The clocks that used to boom out the hour in Westminster were silent.

Maggie took the poker and struck the wood blocks. The sparks went volleying up the chimney in a shower of gold eyes.

"How that makes me . . ." Eleanor began.

She stopped.

"Yes?" said Nicholas.

". . . think of my childhood," she added.

She was thinking of Morris and herself, and old Pippy; but had she told them nobody would know what she meant. They were silent. Suddenly a clear flute-like note rang out in the street below.

"What's that?" said Maggie. She started; she looked at the window; she half rose.

"The bugles," said Renny, putting out his hand to stop her.

The bugles blew again beneath the window. Then they heard them further down the street; then further away still down the next street. Almost directly the hooting of cars began again, and the rushing of wheels as if the traffic had been released and the usual night life of London had begun again.

"It's over," said Maggie. She lay back in her chair; she looked very tired for a moment. Then she pulled a basket towards her and began to darn a sock.

"I'm glad I'm alive," said Eleanor. "Is that wrong, Renny?" she asked. Other people were being killed, it was true. But for the moment there was silence. He did not answer. He was leaning on his elbow, smoking a cigar and looking into the fire.

"I have spent the evening sitting in a coal cellar while other people try to kill each other above my head," he said suddenly. Then he stretched out and took up a paper.

"Renny, Renny, Renny," said Nicholas, as if he were expostulating with a naughty child. He went on reading. The rush of wheels and the hooting of motor cars had run themselves into one continuous sound.

As Renny was reading and Maggie was darning there was silence in the room. Eleanor watched the fire run along veins of tar and blaze and sink.

"What are you thinking, Eleanor?" Nicholas interrupted her. He calls me Eleanor, she thought; that's right.

"About the new world . . ." she said aloud. "D'you think we're going to improve?" she asked.

"Yes, yes," he said, nodding his head.

He spoke quietly as if he did not wish to rouse Renny who was reading, or Maggie who was darning.

Sara was lying back in her chair half asleep. They seemed to be talking, privately, together.

"But how . . ." she began, ". . . how can we improve ourselves . . . live more . . ." she dropped her voice as if she were afraid of waking sleepers, ". . . live more naturally . . . better . . . How can we?"

"It is only a question," he said—he stopped. He drew himself close to her—"of learning. The soul . . ." Again he stopped.

"Yes—the soul?" she prompted him.

"The soul—the whole being," he explained. He hollowed his hands as if to enclose a circle. "It wishes to expand; to adventure; to form—new combinations?"

"Yes, yes," she said, as if to assure him that his words were right.

"Whereas now,"—he drew himself together; put his feet together; he looked like an old lady who is afraid of mice—"this is how we live, screwed up into one hard little, tight little—knot?"

"Knot, knot—yes, that's right," she nodded.

"Each is his own little cubicle; each with his own cross or holy book; each with his fire, his wife . . ."

"Darning socks," Maggie interrupted.

Eleanor started. She had seemed to be looking into the future. But they had been overheard. Their privacy was over.

Now Renny threw down his paper. "It's all damned rot!" he said. Whether he referred to the paper, or had heard what they were saying, Eleanor did not know. But private talk was impossible.

"Why d'you buy them then?" she said, pointing to the papers.

"To light fires with," said Renny.

Maggie laughed and threw down the sock she was mending. "There!" she exclaimed. "Mended. . . ."

Again they sat silent, looking at the fire. Eleanor wished that Nicholas—she called him Nicholas—would go on talking. He seemed to have it all ready, she thought—some theory, some solution. He had given her hope. She felt not only a new space of time, but new powers; there was something unknown within her. She watched his cigarette moving up and down. Maggie took the poker and struck the wood and a shower of red-eyed sparks went volleying up the chimney.

"And what have you been thinking all this time?" said Nicholas, laying his hand on Sara's knee. She started. "Or have you been asleep?" he added.

"I heard what you were saying," she said.

"What were we saying?" he asked.

"The soul flying upwards like sparks up the chimney," she said. The sparks were flying up the chimney.

"Not such a bad shot," said Nicholas.

"Because people always say the same thing," she laughed. She roused herself and sat up. "There's Maggie—she says nothing. There's Renny—he says 'What damned rot!' Eleanor says 'That's just what I was thinking.' . . . And Nicholas, Nicholas,"—she patted him on the knee—"who ought to be in prison, says, 'Oh, my dear friends, let us improve the soul!' "

"Ought to be in prison?" said Eleanor, looking at him.

"Because he loves," Sara explained. She paused. "—the other sex, the other sex, you see," she said lightly, waving her hand in the way that was so like her mother's.

For a second a sharp shiver of repugnance passed over Eleanor's skin as if a knife had sliced it. Then she realised that it touched nothing of importance. The sharp shiver passed. Underneath was—what? She looked at Nicholas. He was watching her.

"Does that," he said, hesitating a little, "make you dislike me, Eleanor?"

"Not in the least! Not in the least!" she exclaimed spontaneously. All the evening, off and on, she had been feeling about him; this, that, and the other; but now all the feelings came together and made one feeling, one whole—liking. "Not in the least," she said again. He gave her a little bow. She returned it with a little bow. But the clock on the mantelpiece was striking. Renny was yawning. It was late. She got up. She went to the window and parted the curtains and looked out. All the houses were still curtained. The cold winter's night was almost black. It was like looking into the hollow of a dark-blue stone. Here and there a star pierced the blue. She had a sense of immensity and peace—as if something had been consumed. . . .

"Shall I get you a cab?" Renny interrupted.

"No, I'll walk," she said, turning. "I like walking in London."

"We will come with you," said Nicholas. "Come, Sara," he said. She was lying back in her chair.

"But I don't want to come," she said, waving him away. "I want to stay; I want to talk; I want to sing—a hymn of praise—a song of thanksgiving. . . ."

"Here is your hat; here is your bag," said Nicholas, giving them to her.

"Come," he said, taking her by the shoulder and pushing her out of the room. "Come."

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Eleanor went up to say good-night to Maggie.

"I should like to stay too," she said. "There are so many things I should like to talk about——"

"But I want to go to bed—I want to go to bed," Renny protested. He stood there with his hands stretched above his head, yawning.

Maggie rose. "So you shall," she laughed at him.

"Don't bother to come downstairs," Eleanor protested as he opened the door for her. But he insisted. He is very rude and at the same time very polite, she thought, as she followed him down the stairs. A man who feels many different things, and all passionately and all at the same time, she thought. . . . But they had reached the hall. Nicholas and Sara were standing there.

"Cease to laugh at me for once, Sara," Nicholas was saying as he put on his coat.

"And cease to lecture me," she said, opening the front door.

Renny smiled at Eleanor as they stood for a moment by the perambulator.

"Educating themselves!" he said.

"Good-night," she said, smiling as she shook hands. That is the man, she said to herself, with a sudden rush of conviction, as she came out into the frosty air, that I should like to have married. She recognised a feeling which she had never felt. But he's twenty years younger than I am, she thought, and married to my cousin. For a moment she resented the passage of time and the accidents of life which had swept her away—from all that, she said to herself. And a scene came before her; Maggie and Renny sitting over the fire. A happy marriage, she thought, that's what I was feeling

all the time. She looked up as she walked down the dark little street behind the others. A broad fan of light, like the sail of a windmill, was sweeping slowly across the sky. It seemed to take what she was feeling and to express it broadly and simply, as if another voice were speaking in another language. Then the light stopped and examined a fleecy patch of sky.

The raid! she said to herself. I'd forgotten the raid!

The others had come to the crossing; there they stood.

"I'd forgotten the raid!" she said aloud as she came up with them.

They were in Victoria Street. The street curved away, looking wider and darker than usual. Little figures were hurrying along the pavement; they emerged for a moment under a lamp, then vanished into darkness again. The street was very empty.

"Will the omnibuses be running as usual?" Eleanor asked as they stood there.

They looked round them. Nothing was coming along the street at the moment.

"I shall wait here," said Eleanor.

"Then I shall go," said Sara abruptly. "Good-night!"

She waved her hand and walked away. Eleanor took it for granted that Nicholas would go with her.

"I shall wait here," she repeated.

But he did not move. Sara had already vanished. Eleanor looked at him. Was he angry? Was he unhappy? She did not know. But here a great form loomed up through the darkness; its lights were shrouded with blue paint. Inside silent people sat huddled up; they looked cadaverous and unreal in the

blue light. "Good-night," she said, shaking hands with Nicholas. She looked back and saw him still standing on the pavement. He still held his hat in his hand. He looked tall, impressive and solitary standing there alone, while the searchlights wheeled across the sky.